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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000692

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: PRO-IRANIAN SHIA NETWORKS TARRING
PRO-WESTERN SHIAS

REF: A. BAKU 000195
[1](#)B. BAKU 00094
[1](#)C. 07 BAKU 01067

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: U.S. exchange participant and graduate of an Iranian theological institute Muslim Elshan Mustafayev told the Embassy that pro-Iranian Shia networks in Azerbaijan have stepped up their criticism of Azerbaijani Shias who travel to the U.S. or maintain contact with Western embassies. Mustafayev's comments suggest a debate is occurring among the small, but growing, network of Azerbaijani Shias about relations with Western states. While the debate is amateurish at times, it underscores the importance of increased engagement with this population segment and Iran's attempt to influence the discourse. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (C) Elshan Mustafayev participated in an exchange program in late 2006 for Azerbaijani Muslims focused on Islam in America. Mustafayev is in his mid-30s and is well educated, with a PhD in history from the Azerbaijani National Academy of Science. Mustafayev also studied Islamic theology for five years in Gazvin, Iran. Mustafayev's background highlights the next generation of post-Soviet Azerbaijani Muslims who are theologically-educated and want Azerbaijanis to better understand and practice the Islamic faith.

Pro-Iranian Shias Criticize Shias for U.S. Links

[1](#)3. (C) Since returning from the U.S. in late 2006, Mustafayev says two pro-Iranian Shia networks have launched amateurish attempts to tar him for cooperating with the U.S. Mustafayev said the popular Iranian-educated cleric Haji Namik Babahanov (profiled in ref A) and the "Jafari Heyati" ("the Jafari Community") group have been at the forefront of a smear campaign against Azerbaijani Muslims who go to the U.S. or have contact with Western Embassies. (NOTE: Jafari is a reference to the Sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq. Jafar is recognized by Shias as the founder of Shia fiqh or jurisprudence.) Mustafayev said the groups have floated the accusation that Mustafayev is working for the U.S. secret services. Mustafayev told us that Babahanov and the Jafari Community group have floated the rumors while warning their adherents against associating with the U.S. and Western Embassies, even claiming that Azerbaijani Muslims who go to

Western Embassy receptions are unclean.

¶4. (C) According to Mustafayev, Babahanov has bragged to his followers that in contrast to Mustafayev, he has refused to participate in any exchange programs and has rebuffed cooperation with the U.S. Embassy. (NOTE: The Embassy has met two times with Babahanov and encouraged closer cooperation. Babahanov has been very cool to this offer.) Jafari community representatives have told their followers that the U.S. Embassy unsuccessfully sought to win over another popular Baku Shia cleric, Haji Shahin Hasanov, offering to build a mosque for him. (NOTE: The Embassy has met several times with Haji Hasanov, who was profiled in ref ¶B. The Embassy maintains cordial relation with Haji Hasanov.)

¶5. (C) Mustafayev said the Jafari Community group has been active for approximately five years and is lead by Haji Abgul Suleymanov, who Mustafayev said lacks any higher education. The Jafari group is small (only 30 - 40 active members) and most of its members are uneducated, but it is very active in holding events. The group also runs a website, www.islam-azeri.az. Mustafayev said it is possible that Iran funds the group, but he had no confirming information.

Comment

¶6. (C) Babahanov and the Jafari Community's slurs appear amateurish, but the criticism suggests there is a real debate among Azerbaijan's practicing Muslims on the issue of contact with foreign states. (Mustafayev said pro-Iranian Azerbaijani groups often clash with Shias who support

Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq and Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah in Lebanon.) The debate also suggests some push-back within Baku's Shia community about the Embassy's attempt over the past year to broaden its outreach to practicing Muslims.

¶7. (C) Mustafayev complained that the GOAJ's monopolistic approach to Islam is a substitute for authentic religious freedom and this is hampering the development of authentic, indigenous Islamic institutions and actors. A wide and growing range of practicing Muslims have argued that the GOAJ's monopoly on Islamic education and practice is simultaneously stifling the development of mainstream Islam and ceding ground to foreign extremist ideas. These commentators unanimously complain that the GOAJ has no long-term approach to prevent the spread of extremism apart from cracking down on practicing Muslims who may or may not be extremists. As the Embassy has argued (ref C), the GOAJ's religious policy rests on the assumption that the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is the legitimate body for regulating Islamic education and practice in Azerbaijan. While this assumption may have held true during the Soviet period, it is increasingly outmoded by the volume of young Azerbaijanis who scoff at the CMB's claim to legitimacy and are looking elsewhere for religious answers.

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